She's Still in There
Rachel Feinstein

In this series, *She's Still in There*, New York conceptual artist Rachel Feinstein tells a story of the interior lives of women as they navigate the social puzzle presented by traditional overt and unspoken expectations. She considers women's space in society, their vulnerability and autonomy, the difference between dream and reality, and the ways in which society changes... and doesn't.

The portfolio mixes still lifes of cliché feminine signifiers: food, jewelry, gowns, high heels, and hair with noir-ish portrait set-ups of faceless women, usually in retreat. Rachel lights each scenario cinematically, with strong sunlight or glaring flash; the saturated colors create images that recall the "storybook" aesthetic of Hollywood's mid-20th century Technicolor years. As sharply-focused as each image is, there's a mystery and tension in them, a turbulence of ambivalent nostalgia, sexual satire, and impending, likely unpleasant, surprise. The artist's stylistic reference to the dream factory is a clear message that beneath the brightly-colored romance, both then and now, there is something darker going on.

It is regrettable, along with a library of stronger adjectives, that Feinstein's art has become more and more relevant in this year's United States. Like artists throughout time who have reacted to conflict, oppression, and loss, she sees an extra urgency to her work these days. She says it clearly and best, "With women's rights being rolled back and empathy for women's stories fading, I want my work to be a place where those stories are believed, protected, and told honestly."

Dek Unu
Arts

Cover: What Happened This Time?
© Rachel Feinstein

PARTY
Cama

Stand “tall,” pull in your stomach, hold your head high and your chin in, and you’ll find yourself not only looking better, but feeling better too. Good posture whether you’re standing, walking, or sitting, gives more room inside for the organs to function properly.

— *“You’re a young lady now” booklet, circa 1952, featured in this image*

Was it my fault? Was it his? Did I push him too far? Is this the right choice? Am I making a mistake? Maybe I was asking for it? What will everyone say? What happened this time?

STEIN'S
FACE POW

Born from a catcall —"You look good with some meat on your bones" — this work reflects on how women's bodies are seen and spoken about. This image examines how beauty and discomfort coexist, how admiration and ownership blur.

Meat on Her Bones

Photographed in my grandparents' prairie using heirloom dresses, *Well, Look At What She Was Wearing* connects personal memory to cultural critique. The work reflects how clothing serves both as protection and as evidence in the stories told about women.

Well, Look at What She Was Wearing

It Was Only One Time captures a quiet exchange that feels familiar, feminine, and deceptively safe. The work examines how vulnerability, judgment, and tenderness coexist within the spaces women are told to feel comfortable in.

It Was Just One Time

As she dangles there, will she fall? It may just be a moment in time or a life-changing moment.

There She Is

As she sits, she begins to daydream of another life. Slowly, she starts to vanish, and when she finally notices, a quiet calm settles in. An hour passes, and only the image holds what is left of her. Where did she go?

Finally, some alone time. He's waited all evening for this.

"Honey, where are you?" Truthfully, she is not altogether sure.

As she climbs out of the pond, she wonders how she'll make it back to the house. She laughs to herself, realizing that after the night she's just had, that's her first concern. Time will move forward, and so will she.

THE CAPRI 235

How did she know it was time? She didn't. Yet her mother had said she would, that women always do. So she did.

Artist Interview - Rachel Feinstein

In all your art, your "hand" is highly recognizable: sharp shadows, saturated hues, those reds... in a word, "Technicolor!"

I found my style through lots of trial and error. At the end of college, we created a thesis. Through months of research, I began to create images that felt like cinematic stills to create the work that became *Untitled: Insignificant Moments*. Throughout the process of creating this work, I knew I wanted to use harsh shadows to really elevate the mystery and tension in each image. This, combined with the bright color theory that

Rachel Feinstein

was woven in throughout the project, is what became my "style." Once I had the first shoot and saw the images that were created, I knew this was how I saw the world and how I was going to be able to show the world through my own eyes. The bright flash almost gives it a paparazzi feel to some of the images, which cultivates this feeling of intrusion into a world we were not necessarily invited into. That exact feeling is how I had always felt being a woman in this world, and being able to showcase this in my work was such an exciting feeling.

What's your elevator pitch? What do you say when an interested artist, curator, gallerist, or civilian says, "Tell me about your work."

I would say, “My work explores femininity and the tension between beauty and discomfort. I’m inspired by old Hollywood films that once defined femininity but also limited it. My photographs balance softness with unease, revealing the emotional weight behind idealized images of femininity. I’m interested in that space where beauty starts to feel like tension.”

Yours is socially "conscious" art, anchored to a personal and general politics. What is the message you'd like to see your audience take away?

My method centers around the space that women have held and do hold in society by using tropes and pieces of the past to emphasize how the world has put women in a very specific box, even with advancements in rights and freedoms. I hope that my work connects with women on a level they feel is personal and attaches itself to a specific memory for them. For others, I hope my work is able to give them the space to take an extra moment to consider what the women in their lives have endured and continue to endure.

The US government has become both actively anti-intellectual and anti-female. As the atmosphere has changed, has your work changed? Have reactions to your work changed?

My work hasn’t necessarily changed as the government becomes more openly anti-intellectual and anti-female, but it has begun to feel more urgent. Because my practice is rooted in my own experiences and those of the women around me, I naturally pull from the climate we’re living in now. This

moment has brought new inspiration, but also a sense of pressure to create work that speaks to these issues and gives voice to those who may not have one. With women's rights being rolled back and empathy for women's stories fading, I want my work to be a place where those stories are believed, protected, and told honestly.

Talk about your creativity. Where do good ideas come from? What helps? Music? Conversation? Meditation? Medication?

My art comes from lived experience, both my own and that of the women around me. I am drawn to the small, personal moments that reveal something deeper about femininity, vulnerability, and control. I also collect vintage pieces from the 1950s and 1960s, and those objects often find their way into my photographs. They carry a history that feels both

beautiful and restrictive, which connects to many of the themes I explore.

I spend a lot of time watching films from those decades, and they have shaped how I think visually through their lighting, gestures, and the quiet tension beneath all the glamour. Sometimes an idea comes first, and I look for imagery to match it, while other times I find an object or film still that sparks something, and the concept grows from there.

Most of my creative ideas come late at night when everything is still. That is usually when I can slow down, look through old photos or fabrics, and begin to make emotional connections. My process is less about forcing a concept and more about letting the mood and story reveal themselves over time.

How do you get from a good idea to finished art? Does it happen all at once? At the end of meticulous planning? Good ideas finished in post?

My workflow is often quite preplanned. I take my time to research my concept and then plan colors and feelings that I want the image to convey. I often make a Shoot Concept board where I place all of my shot ideas and what I am trying to convey. This makes it easier to communicate to models what our goal of the shoot is. I work in camera rather than in post. I like to create a set, a world, and then do small editing in post.

What is it about your images that draws people in? As you refine each work, what are you looking for? What makes a project "work?"

I think what draws people in is that my work leaves room to feel something rather than just understand it. I'm not trying to

tell viewers exactly what to think. If someone looks at a piece and it stirs something in them, I think that means it's working.

What differences have you seen in the ways that male viewers and female viewers react to your work? Do they see different things in the same piece?

When viewing my work, men often mention the bright colors and how "fun" the photos are as a first impression. In contrast, when women view my work, their first reaction is, "Oh, wow! I

relate to this image." Women often share a personal experience that they immediately thought of. When viewing a single piece, I usually hear of a large variety of different experiences that people, both men and women, feel connect them with the piece. I do not share my own experience that inspired the piece to give the piece space to breathe and allow for each viewer to have their own personal experience with it.

Your art is challenging. Is an audience's understanding of the conceptual foundation of an artwork necessary for its success, or is it mainly about the experience?

I don't believe that successful art needs to have an explanation. As an artist, I do love to hear the thoughts and ideas that brought a piece to life but I do not believe that those thoughts are necessary for a piece to be successful. While the knowledge of a concept may give the viewer a deeper understanding of the art, it should not be necessary for the art to connect with the viewer. They may not fully grasp what the artist is intending but the real intention is for it to mean something, anything, to them.

To strive for originality is to invite failures. We have all had images that just wouldn't gel. Do you ever get blocked? If yes, what do you do about it? If not, what's your secret?

Yes, I have had many periods of block where I am not sure where I am going to take my work next. In these periods, I try to have grace for myself and go view art at galleries or watch new movies and just try to consume as much as possible. This allows me the space to step away from my own work and my own mind and see how others have viewed the world.

I have hundreds of images that I have spent hours creating but will never be seen. I do sometimes revisit them and see if there is a new way for me to look at the image to make it "work" for me, but often it still falls flat. If that is the case, I work to understand why this is the case and how can I use that idea in something new that will feel complete.

The artists' life is the quest for the next thing on the horizon, but everyone starts somewhere. Many started very young. What's your story?

I was extremely lucky to grow up with a grandfather who loved photography and shared that passion with me. Then, when I was in high school, our photography program had everything I needed to fall in love. My high school photography teacher was so important in developing the self-confidence that led me to continue to create and feel that I had something to say. She was able to push and support me in ways that allowed me to explore while also perfecting my craft. I am always so grateful to her for allowing and supporting the strange ideas I needed to try during that time. It taught me the real importance of play in my practice. I learned everything about film photography and was Best In Show at our senior art show.

Although photography was a passion in high school, in college your first career destination was Special Education. How did Plan A become Plan B?

I realized there was a difference between who I was and who I was expected to be. I felt it was expected of me to go into a career that had a predictable and understood path that I could follow into my future. As I went through classes, I continued to feel unfulfilled and didn't understand why since I was doing a career that would help people and make a difference.

I decided to take a photography class and, as I was working on the first project, I immediately felt more at home than I did in any of my education classes. This was a difficult transition, but I knew that photography was a path I needed to follow.

I had some amazing teachers who really showed me that photography could be a suitable career. I eventually switched to photography as my major and graduated with a BFA. A real pivotal moment for me was when I was selected to be the photo editor for the fashion magazine on campus and was able to really grow and show my curatorial skills as well. Once school was over, I moved to NYC from Ohio and began pursuing my career.

East coast aspirants think of NYC as THE place to be. What was it like for you getting started? What's it like to keep going?

Moving from Ohio to NYC was really tough, especially since I graduated from college in 2020 during the height of the pandemic. So I waited a year and worked for a remote marketing

agency, which allowed me the financial freedom to move to NYC. It was really hard getting a start in the photo community in NYC, and I am still trying to find where exactly I fit in. Working some freelance photo positions has given me some extra flexibility to explore more of NYC and work within in it. I am based in Brooklyn and have a studio in my apartment that I work out of. I do most of my work either on location or in my studio or apartment with the help of my roommates. It is honestly a constant struggle to keep creating and continuing to feel inspired. I am working to hopefully find gallery representation, which is the goal.

Most artists' resumés are full of jobs outside the arts. Plenty of successful pros take corporate jobs to stabilize finances. Any "survival" employment adventures on your timeline?

Following my graduation, to earn funds to live from while I continued to create my own personal work, I found a corporate job with a marketing agency where I was a Social Media Manager. Once I moved to New York, I began to do some freelance photography work and needed more flexibility than a corporate job allowed, so I became a barista part-time. So now, I work freelance and part-time at a coffee shop and love the people and community I get from the coffee world and the ability to continue to create my personal work.

Were your early days analog? When did you convert to digital? Do you miss the smelly, wet darkroom days?

I learned everything I know with analog, and I often miss it. I converted to digital during college when I needed to shoot and shoot to produce large quantities of work each week. I don't have regular access to a darkroom anymore, so it is not part of my practice. I do believe that learning how to create a scene

that will be shot and developed in the darkroom gave my practice the structure it still has.

Does “finished” mean “printed” or “posted?” How do you use the Internet and social media? Useful? Necessary but annoying? Worthless?

For me, finished is printed and/or finalized. I use social media as a way to connect with others through my work and to see others' practices and work around me. But, it is not something I use and feel is the correct way to view my work, even though that is where it is being seen at the moment. I know it is a necessary evil at this point, but I do feel my work is meant to be seen large and in a gallery.

Similarly, what about generative A.I.? Useful? Anathema?

AI will not find a place in my practice. I feel very strongly about creating the world in real time and then photographing that world. I often try to do as little editing as possible and do not want to add in something that isn’t me to my work.

Tools of the trade? Is any hardware or software that you rely on to realize your vision? Anything you've found indispensable?

I would not consider myself to be all about the gear, but I do know what works best for me. I often shoot with Canon products and use Profoto off-camera flashes, which give the harsh direct lighting that intensifies the deep shadows seen in my work. For post-production, I go from Capture One to Lightroom to Photoshop to hit all of the bases.

You've traveled a long way in a relatively short time. What's in the future? Next steps? Targets to hit?

Next, I want to continue to explore through my work and create a concept for a new show. I have made creating my personal work a priority. It is my favorite thing to do and think about, so it makes it easy to keep striving for change and betterment. I'm looking forward to the possibility of showing my work in a New York City gallery

Thanks, Rachel. Please share your contact information for inquiries and links to find more of your artwork.

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